

Another of My Ideas Bites the Dust

By Viola Wong Yuk-yue

Many people think that effective materials are crucial to the study of a language, while a great number believe that the context of the school or cultural context is essential to acquiring a language. More often than not, a trained or qualified language teacher has equipped himself or herself with a host of success stories. Unfortunately, teachers' frustrations with the teaching situation can cause us to ignore these success stories.

Teachers can be frustrated by the work place or the people (including both colleagues and students) they associate with. Teachers can also become frustrated by various changes in schedules, approaches in teaching, or expectations. Teachers will experience frustration if their own effort does not succeed, if the learners' performances remain unsatisfactory, or if students display indifference or bad attitudes. This writer has in mind the language situation in Hong Kong, which is about to undergo a change of sovereignty from British to Chinese rule. English is claimed to be the second language in the Hong Kong educational system, but everybody knows that s/he can get by without speaking even a single English word in everyday life.

So much for the downside about the work of second language teaching. If a second language teacher has "bitten the dust," s/he does not necessarily have to "bite the bullet."

Solutions can be found if one tries to relate a second language to a completely different culture, or to a group of people who might have completely different backgrounds, tastes, likes or dislikes, preferences, or prejudices. Instead of focusing on preoccupations of the learners, we can try to integrate language learning into the learners' activities. If we take a holistic view of second language learning, many solutions immediately emerge. The trick is to show second language learners how English can help facilitate or enhance their knowledge and interests. As teachers, we need to highlight the experience and reward the effort in grappling with the problems relating to English. Instead of telling about the importance of accuracy, let the learners feel the impact resulting from the inaccurate use of the language. Our ultimate aim is to ensure that a language learner is a language performer. The teacher has to convince learners that the language can be an effective tool for them by helping them connect the experiences between first- and second-language learning.

The following are some ways teachers can help students connect the acquisition of a second language to the tasks or activities related to the students themselves in their daily lives. These examples help to clarify what the teacher can do to make the learning of the second language-English-more compatible with the students' desires.

Language Skill Focus: Writing

Aim: To appreciate the fun and functions of writing for self-expression.

Task for students: This is a "Read Me" exercise. Ask students to write about things that they would like to share with their classmates. These things may include likes or dislikes, emotions, current topics, or interesting experiences. Ask them to exchange their "Read Me" books with their partners and have a chat on what they have learned about each other.

Notes to Teacher: This helps students express ideas that are intimate or close to them, make full use of their limited linguistic repertoire, and develop a close rapport with their contemporaries. The emphasis is on developing effective communication in writing, an appreciation of using language to express one's thoughts in one's own words, and effective use of different figures of speech, such as metaphor, simile, and allusion.

Language Skill Focus: Reading

Aim: To encourage authentic responses to genuine materials.

Task for students: Ask students to collect a number of headlines from newspapers and write down questions that they would like to ask; then compare the questions they asked with the articles that they read in the newspaper.

Notes to teacher: This exercise can alert students as to how the language can be used, to reflect political or other biases. This exercise also emphasizes personal involvement in reading. A comparison can also be made between newspapers in the students' native languages and those in English.

Language Skill Focus: Listening and Speaking

Aim: To explore some of the realia for listening and speaking purposes such as the use of intonation, pauses, fillers, etc.

Task for students: For class discussion ask students to tune in to a radio phone-in programme on the English channel for a period of time (a week or two) and note down the characteristics of spoken English. After some preparation in class, students will call up the station about an issue that is of interest to them and record the conversation.

Notes to Teacher: This activity gives students experience in speaking and listening. This is particularly useful to those students who seldom have a chance to communicate with native speakers of English. With the students, discuss possible ways of improving their listening and speaking skills, considering the practicality of various suggestions and the realities of the learning situation.

A teacher should be careful when lamenting that "another of my ideas bites the dust!" because only the learner can say whether the idea has bitten the dust or has opened up a window on their learning and acquisition processes.

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